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Penobscot Men

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PENOBSCOT MEN

By Mike Prokosch

The Fowlers of Millinocket lie near the heart of Maine's north woods story. Henry David Thoreau and Fannie Hardy Eckstorm saw the family's wilderness existence as antithetical to the commercialization and industrialization of their times, but the Fowlers themselves adapted easily when water power, coal, and oil upended the woods economy around them. Their family history traces the energy revolutions that shaped the northern forest and our country. Mike Prokosch is an organizer, popular economics educator, and hiker who lives in Boston.

NORTHERN Maine was sparsely settled in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in the Penobscot Valley north of Bangor and Old Town, which was still largely a wilderness frontier. As the original white settlers on the West Branch of the Penobscot River, the Fowlers hold a celebrated spot in north woods literature. Henry David Thoreau painted them as self-sufficient folk living among eagles, musquash, wolves, and moose, and Maine folklorist Fannie Hardy Eckstorm immortalized them as "pioneers among a race of pioneers and watermen of superlative excellence . . . brought up in the woods with no neighbors within miles, and never a highroad except in winter but such as was afforded by a wild and frothing river, rushing down over endless rapids and falls."[1] Stories of the Fowlers' skill and courage shaped the image of the Maine backwoodsman, but behind these accounts lay an agenda. Both Thoreau and Eckstorm used the Fowlers to fight their own battles with an increasingly urbanized and industrialized society. They highlighted the family's independence, its keen knowledge of place, and its quiet responsibility for its own survival. Still more important were the simplicity and unity of the family's life. For Thoreau and Eckstorm, the Fowlers, like images on an old glass-plate negative, showed what was missing in modern life.

The Fowlers did confront sudden sharp changes in the woods economy around them, but they met those changes with a shrewdness that is missing from the literary accounts. The Fowlers were farmers as well as

frontiersmen, guides, and river drivers. They were small-time timber cutters who fed a global lumber trade and helped make the West Branch an industrial river. As new energy sources and capital accumulation strategies changed the industry and the woods, new generations of Fowlers created fresh niches in it. More directly than their images in literature, the Fowlers' livelihoods point to an economic and energy history beneath Maine's wilderness legend.

An Economy of Water, Wind, and Muscle

"In 1816 Thomas Fowler married Betsy Martin, and they were living in Pittsfield, Maine," wrote Albert Fowler in 1950. In March 1829 with a family of five, Thomas Fowler started for the West Branch of the Penobscot River with two teams of oxen, a cow, household goods, and farm implements. Albert Fowler described his ancestors' journey: "the route as far as Brownville was not difficult, as passable roads existed all the way. From Brownville on, it was virgin forest with no roads, except a tote road as far as Knight's Landing on Schoodic Lake. He crossed Schoodic Lake to what is now known as Rand Cove, then crossed overland into Seboois Lake, across that lake, thence across land to Endless Lake, from this lake to East Seboois Lake, and then to Nollesimic Lake, across this lake and overland coming to the West Branch of the Penobscot near Grand Falls at the head of Shad Pond." Thomas Fowler was a lumberman, drawn to the Penobscot by the clumps of pine and possibly by the water power that could run a mill on the banks of the river. He knew as well that the rivers and lakes were full of salmon, shad, and trout, and the woods were full of moose, deer, and Caribou. "It is possible," Albert Fowler continued, "when he came to the location where he built his house, he might have used the same expression that Brigham Young did when he first saw the Great Salt Lake, 'THIS IS THE PLACE.'"[2]

But was the Fowlers' first home site really "the place"? Why did the Fowlers settle on the south side of Shad Pond below the impassible Grand Falls? The main route up the West Branch was two miles away. Hunters and explorers avoided Grand Falls by traveling along Shad Pond's north shore and up Millinocket Stream to a well-established portage trail. The portage, where the Fowlers eventually moved, was a choke-point for traffic up and down the West Branch. Why did it take the Fowler family nine years to move to this choice spot? An answer lies in the fast-moving history of the West Branch economy.[3]

The Fowlers arrived as lumbering was just beginning on the West Branch, moving up the river from the mills at Old Town and Great

Close up of Lucius Hubbard's 1899 map of northern Maine, showing Indian Purchase just southeast of Pemadumcook Lake on the West Branch of the Penobscot River. By the time this map was drawn, the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad intersected with the West Branch near the center of the Indian Purchase. Shad Pond, where the Fowler's first settled, can be seen in the southeastern corner of the Indian Purchase. Map courtesy of the author.

Works. "Previous to this time, the river was used only by travelers and explorers," according to historian Alfred Geer Hempstead. Lumbering first began on the West Branch in July 1828, by several downriver men who found some "monster" pines near the site of present-day East Millinocket, about four miles below Shad Pond. The nine part-time lumbermen felled the "monsters" and returned the following spring — just as the Fowlers were settling in. As Maine cartographer and promoter Moses Greenleaf wrote in 1829, "a large part of the farmers, released from the agricultural labors of summer, employ themselves and their teams in cutting and transporting the timber of the forests to the banks of the streams and rivers for a market."[4] Shad Pond was a good base for this kind of seasonal lumbering. In winter, Fowler's farm could serve as his logging camp, and up Millinocket Stream was valuable meadow hay to feed his draft animals. Like his downriver neighbors and in-laws, the McCauslins, he settled near rapids where he might help drive logs.

Thoreau described George McCauslin in 1846 as "a waterman [for] twenty-two years [who] had driven on the lakes and headwaters of the Penobscot five or six springs in succession, but was now settled here to raise supplies for the lumberers and for himself."[5] In driving their own logs and perhaps those belonging to others, Thomas Fowler and his sons would have gotten to know the river well.

Lumbering methods changed quickly in the following decades. Yearly cuts on the Penobscot more than doubled between 1832 and 1841, and the accessible stands of pine below Fowlers' farm were the first to go. "Twenty-five or thirty years ago," wrote journalist and woodsman John S. Springer in 1855, "large tracts of country were covered principally with Pine-trees. Those tracks [sic] seemed purposely located in the vicinity of lakes, large streams, and rivers. . . . But the woodman's ax, together with the destructive fires which have swept over large districts from time to time, have, so to speak, driven this tree far back into the interior wilderness." West Branch lumbermen followed the pine upstream as it vanished from the river near the Fowler homestead. As they moved their operations to the lakes above Grand Falls, traffic over the portage from Millinocket Stream to Quakish Lake must have multiplied. In 1837

A survey map drawn in 1836 by Isaac Small shows Indian Purchase and Township #3. Shad Pond is located in the lower right at the confluence of the West Branch and Millinocket Rivers. Map courtesy of the author.

or 1838 the Fowlers moved from Shad Pond to a new log house on Millinocket Stream, and Thomas Fowler cut a two-mile path at or near an old Indian carry around Grand Falls, where the West Branch fell some 112 feet in three miles. Fowler "cleared the farm where the present Great Northern Paper Mill was built, carried on a lumber business, and toted across the carry to Quakish, over the road he built, whatever traffic that came along that was headed for the region above," Albert Fowler wrote.[6]

The Fowlers probably did more business taking supplies over the carry than they did in provisioning lumbermen and river drivers as George McCauslin was doing downriver. The lumber operators who moved millions of board feet down the river every year first had to move hundreds of tons of supplies up to their logging camps. Animals and men consumed heroic quantities of feed and food in a winter of lumbering. Some hay came from upriver farms and river meadows, cut in the summer and stored on platforms above the water. But the wilderness meadows and farms did not grow the tons of flour, beef, and molasses the men ate. By 1850 5,000 men and 4,000 oxen and horses were working in the Penobscot watershed, with probably a third or more on the West Branch. The Fowlers no doubt carted tons of supplies across the carry to feed the teams building camps and clearing logging roads dur-

Thomas Fowler's farm at The Carry in the 1890s. Fowler recreated an ancient Indian carry around Grand Falls that became the route for all travel and commerce moving northward. This site would later house the Great Northern Paper mill. Photo courtesy of the Norcross Heritage Trust.

ing the summer and fall.[7] Once the river froze, however, the carting business fell off. Thoreau described the seasonal changes in transporting provisions:

> In the summer, all stores — the grindstone and the plough of the pioneer, flour, pork, and utensils for the explorer — must be conveyed up the river in bateaux. In the winter, however, which is very equable and long, the ice is the great highway, and the loggers' team penetrates to Chesuncook Lake, and still higher up, even two hundred miles above Bangor. Imagine the solitary sled-track running far up into the snowy and ever green wilderness, hemmed in closely for a hundred miles by the forest, and again stretching straight across the broad surfaces of concealed lakes!

Teamsters driving supplies up Thoreau's "solitary sled-track" to the lumber camps would not have needed the Fowlers' services; their teams could haul the cargo across Fowler's path themselves.[8]

By the time of Thoreau's visit in 1846, the Fowlers staffed an important link in a rapidly growing industry, but at the same time they were living at the very edge of white settlement. An incident in 1839 highlighted their frontier status. "Indians from the Old Town tribe who used to pass by up the river to their hunting grounds notified Fowler that the Mohawk Indians had declared war on the Old Town Tribe, and would come down the West Branch to attack them," according to Albert Fowler. "They advised him to move his family from Millinocket which he did, moving to Bangor for a year where my father John F. Fowler was born August 18, 1840." There are problems with this story. Mohawk raids were a threat a century earlier, but by 1840 they were only a memory, and the Bangor *Democrat* makes no mention of a Mohawk threat at the time. Possibly Penobscots were hoping to discourage the Fowlers, who moved onto their tribal land in 1829 and then occupied the Penobscots' traditional carry route. However, there is another explanation. The *Democrat* from 1839 to 1840 is filled with reports of armed confrontations on Maine's border with British Canada — incidents known as the Aroostook War — and one article in March 1839 mentions a rumor that Mohawks were volunteering to fight on the side of the British. Penobscots may have carried this information to the Fowler farm on their many journeys up the Penobscot River. In any event, the record suggests that the Fowlers believed they were living in a wilderness where an Indian massacre was still possible. Indeed, the location was so remote they simply squatted, rather than purchase their farm, moving into an Indian

Henry David Thoreau was in his late twenties when he journeyed into the Maine wilderness, despite the fact that his published accounts of the trip were posthumous. This portrait shows Thoreau in about 1854 when he was in his mid thirties.

township that the state later took from the Penobscots. Their choice was no accident. Most pioneers in the 1840s, George McCauslin told Thoreau, had to deal with large timberland owners who kept them from settling in northern Maine. Lumber speculators did not want settlers to form organized townships that the state could then tax. "Free land" may be a popular notion on the frontier, but it was quite rare. Like the "Liberty Men" of post-Revolutionary central Maine, the Fowlers established ownership of their land by working it.[9]

A Whiff of Steam

In October 1846 Henry David Thoreau interrupted his stay at Walden Pond for a trip to Maine. Traveling to Bangor by railroad and steamboat, he met a relative "engaged in the lumber-trade in Bangor" who had an interest in timberlands and a dam on the West Branch.[10] The notes from Thoreau's journey became the first section of *The Maine Woods,* a classic in wilderness literature, and the Fowlers are among his featured players. In them Thoreau sensed the wilderness ideal he was seeking at Walden: a family living in seamless harmony with its natural surroundings. When Thoreau first encountered Thomas Fowler — "old Fowler's" son — the younger man was

> just completing a new log-hut, and was sawing out a window through the logs, nearly two feet thick. . . . He had begun to paper his house with spruce-bark, turned inside out, which had a good effect, and was in keeping with the circumstances. Instead of water we got here a drought of beer, which, it was allowed, would be better: clear and thin, but strong and stringent as the cedar-sap. It was as if we sucked at the very teats of Nature's pine-clad bosom in these parts, — the sap of all Millinocket botany commingled, — the topmost, most fantastic, and spiciest of the primitive wood, and whatever invigorating and stringent gum or essence it afforded steeped and dissolved in it, — a lumberer's drink, which would acclimate and naturalize a man at once, —

> which would make him see green, and, if he slept, dream that he heard the wind sough among the pines.

Thoreau and Thomas Fowler poled up the shallow and sandy Millinocket Stream in a leaky batteau to the elder Fowler's farm, where they found the old pioneer cutting meadow grass along the shore and on the islands. At the Fowler farm they exchanged batteaus and set out for the upper West Branch by rounding Grand Falls on a horse-sled designed to "jump the numerous rocks in the way." Thoreau's guides packed the last of the season's pickled salmon, "and so graduate[d] . . . to simpler forest fare." Thoreau described the wilderness character of the Fowlers' frontier life:

> The week before they had lost nine sheep out of their first flock, by the wolves. The surviving sheep came round the house, and seemed frightened, which induced them to go and look for the rest, when they found seven dead and lacerated, and two still alive. These last they carried to the house, and, as Mrs. Fowler said, they were merely scratched in the throat, and had no more visible wound than would be produced by the prick of a pin. She sheared off the wool from their throats, and washed them, and put on some salve, and turned them out, but in a few moments they were missing, and had not been found since.

The route to the upper West Branch led "through the wild pasture where the sheep were killed" and beyond that "over rocky hills, where the sled bounced and slid along, like a vessel pitching in a storm." The portage, Thoreau surmised, followed an ancient Indian trail.[11] Cedar beer, wolves, injured sheep, jumper sleds, Indian portages, and pickled salmon made up the Fowlers' existence on the Maine frontier. They might have been drinking from Nature's teats, but they knew how to brew Nature's sap into beer. Thoreau's Fowlers were farmers whose skill and energy made the entire wilderness their homestead.

Thoreau left something significant out of his account: money. If the Fowlers were making a living from cutting trees, portaging boats, and feeding logging crews and river drivers, that story was missing from Thoreau's description. If he paid the McCauslins and Fowlers for guiding, supplying, and portaging his party, he never mentioned it. Rather, he "persuaded McCauslin, who was not unwilling to revisit the scenes of his driving, to accompany us," and Thomas Fowler joined them at a moment's notice.[12] Evidently the Fowlers' time was their own, and they spent it in an easy exchange with the wilderness around them. Time was not money, as it was for Thoreau's debt-ridden neighbors in Concord:

> I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools. . . . Who made them serfs of the soil? Why should they eat their sixty acres, when man is condemned to eat only his peck of dirt? Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born? They have got to live a man's life, pushing all these things before them, and get on as well as they can. How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot![13]

In the opening chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau noted that the "laboring man" had "no time to be anything but a machine."[14] Masters of their time and their surroundings, Thoreau's Fowlers and McCauslins seemed to enjoy a life of freedom from "things." But they were anything but deprived: for Thoreau's party they served "piping-hot wheaten cakes . . . ham, eggs, and potatoes, and milk and cheese, the produce of the farm; and also shad and salmon, tea sweetened with molasses, and sweet cakes. . . . Mountain cranberries . . . stewed and sweetened, were the common dessert." The Penobscot pioneers were living simply, but living well; they were the antithesis of Thoreau's townsmen: farmers beyond the reach of a commercial civilization's discontents.[15]

Pushing upriver, Thoreau found final proof of the consummate skill and local knowledge that the Fowlers employed in coaxing a living from the wilderness.

> With Uncle George [McCauslin] in the stern, and Tom in the bow, each using a spruce pole about twelve feet long, and pointed with iron, and poling on the same side, we shot up the rapids like a salmon, the water rushing and roaring around, so that only a practiced eye could distinguish a safe course, or tell what was deep water and what rocks, frequently grazing the latter on one or both sides, with a hundred as narrow escapes as ever the Argo had in passing through the Symplegades.[16]

Here were men confronting the full force of nature with a quiet daring and intimate familiarity. They used their skill and knowledge to turn the river's raw energy to their purpose without wasted effort, just as they had fashioned the sapling sled that portaged their boats over the boulder-strewn carry trail.

Traveling onward, Thoreau encountered signs that jolted him out of his fantasy of a north country wilderness: rocks dented by the rivermen's

spiked boots; rocks worn smooth by boats passing over them; a whole clean red brick sitting on a rock; boom logs "laid up on the rocks and lashed to trees, for spring use; a ring-bolt drilled into a rock and fastened with lead. Thoreau visited the newly built dam on North Twin Lake in which his relative from Bangor had invested. "This dam is a quite important and expensive work for this country," he reported, "raising the whole river ten feet, and flooding, as they said, some sixty square miles by means of the innumerable lakes with which the river connects. It is a lofty and solid structure, with sloping piers some distance above, made of frames of logs filled with stones, to break the ice. Here every log pays toll as it passes through the sluices."[17]

Money had returned. Thoreau was encountering the West Branch at one of its pivotal moments. Merchantable stands of pine and spruce were becoming scarce, especially on the lower river. The same year he visited the Fowlers, lumber operator Samuel Smith was telling the state Committee on Interior Waters that the timber on most of the West and East branch townships had been "culled."[18] As more operators moved into the region above Grand Falls, river improvement and greater cooperation among river driving companies became essential. In 1846 opera-

An etching depicting a nineteenth century Maine log drive, found in Thomas Sedgwick Steele's 1880 work, *Canoe and Camera or Two Hundred Miles Through the Maine Forests*. Maine Historical Society image.

tors and timberland owners formed the Penobscot Log Driving Company and merged the individual operators' drives under a single river driver. The company transformed the West Branch into an industrial river, with dams and cleared channels reaching farther upstream each season. "The mission of men there," Thoreau mused, "seems to be, like so many busy demons, to drive the forest all out of the country, from every solitary beaver-swamp and mountain-side, as soon as possible."[19] Could such demons live in the Fowlers' Eden? Apparently, for the Fowlers were among them, cutting their lumbering livelihood out from under themselves.

Some saw no conflict here, just progress. Cutting away the forest would improve the land for farming, Moses Greenleaf wrote, and the sunlight falling directly on the earth would lengthen the season and increase the average temperatures. The country would provide opportunities for agriculture, and turn the inhabitants' attention to the more steady occupations of manufacturing.[20] John Springer presented a similar vision of progress in his *Forest Life and Forest Trees*:

> A period not as long, probably, as from the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth to the present time, will transpire, ere the loggers' camp will give place to the farm-house, and golden fields of waving grain relieve the sun-hid earth of the gigantic forests so long cherished upon its laboring bosom. We can seem to look through the following prophetic verse as a magic spy-glass, which dispels time as well as space, and see the reality it points out pass vividly before the imagination.
>
> 'Loud before us grew the murmur
> Of the age to come,
> Clang of smiths and tread of farmers,
> Bearing harvests home!
> Here her virgin lap with treasures
> Shall the green earth fill,
> Waving wheat and golden maize-ears
> Crown each beechen hill.'[21]

Quoting John Greenleaf Whittier's famous "The Lumbermen," Springer voiced a unique American pastoral vision which, as historian Leo Marx said, projected a Golden Age into the future. This vision of progress, although grounded in a pastorale as old as the nation's founding, also included an explosive new force that would transform the world and boost confidence in the prospect of taming the natural forces such as Thoreau

encountered on the West Branch. It would be another half century before steamboats, steam engines, and railroads actually reached the West Branch, but in Thoreau's age they had begun to change the river from afar and transform the Fowlers' livelihood as well.[22]

In the years before the Civil War, water and wind carried Maine lumber to the east coast, the West Indies, and Europe. But as a transcontinental rail network linked forests and factories across the United States, a bigger market opened up, and the West Branch loggers fed it, harvesting on average 36 million board feet of lumber a year from 1873 to 1900. During the last of those decades, the yearly cut reached nearly 46 million feet. This voracious market pushed the lumbering frontier up the West Branch to the headwaters of the north-flowing Allagash River. Supplying a winter camp of 165 men and 55 horses took something like 500 tons of hay, food, and equipment — a grueling load. "I am not familiar with any kind of labor which tests a man's physical abilities and powers of endurance more than boating supplies up river," Springer wrote. But as the lumbering operations moved farther upstream, supply routes shifted westward to Moosehead Lake and Northeast Carry, completely bypassing Fowler's farm. These new roads, Springer wrote in 1855, "penetrate much nearer to lumber berths than formerly, and enable us to convey our provisions, implements, and even boats, with horse teams, a considerable portion of the distance once laboriously performed by water."[23]

By 1877 supplies for the upper West Branch camps arrived from the Moosehead Lake and Chamberlain-Eagle lake areas, as well as a route from Brownville and Katahdin Iron Works. An 1879 map depicts these roads, along with supply farms on Ripogenus, Chesuncook, and Ragged lakes and near Northeast Carry. "The prominent owners of timber lands," according to an 1860 state survey, "have farms cleared, upon which hay and grain are cut for the purpose of feeding their teams in winter."[24] The new roads and farms must have cut deeply into Thomas Fowler's carry business. Bypassing the West Branch, the new routes may have left the lower lakes a backwater used only by river drivers and occasional tourists intent on climbing Katahdin. In response, Fowler reportedly cut a tote road from Medway to his carry farm. It is unclear when this road was actually made or who made it, and it does not appear on maps of the period. One traveler noted no road through to Medway in 1871 but found a "rough cart-way" when he returned in 1878. Old Fowler, however, was seventy-nine and infirm in 1871, and he died in 1874.[25] Even if the Medway road was cut earlier than 1871, the Fowlers would have gotten little carting business from it during the winter sea-

son. Nor is there evidence that they received much income from river drivers. Penobscot Log Driving Company ledgers, which are extant from 1860 through 1869, show only nine payments to Fowlers, mainly for small sums of money:

July 5, 1860, Thomas Fowler, $5.08.
June 17, 1861, Thomas Fowler, $6.83 and another 36c. (The surrounding entries are for incidental expenses: 2 Dinners & 2 Suppers, horse + waggon to Oldtown, putting Boats & Tools in Store house at Bangor…)
November 27, 1861, Thomas Fowler Jr., supplies + labor $16.18 and Freight on Rigging $4.00.
July 11, 1864, Thomas Fowler, hauling logs, $48.00.
October 30, 1866, T. Fowler, furniture etc, $7.70.
November 9, 1866, F.M. Fowler, labor etc., $18.00.

On July 31, 1866, the company paid John Fowler $119.00, the only surviving record of a Fowler contracting out as a full-time river driver.[26] All in all, surviving historical records support Albert Fowler's impression that independent lumbering and farming anchored the Fowlers' livelihood, especially during the second generation.

As the lumbering industry moved upriver, old Fowler's children grew up, married, and moved away. The two sons who stayed nearby were independent lumbermen. Thomas Jr., Thoreau's guide, brought out his first log drives in 1857 at age thirty-five. In 1889 a Thomas Fowler appears in a newspaper estimate of that year's West Branch log drive, cutting a million board feet at the foot of Pemadumcook Lake with eight horses and thirty men — one of the year's smallest cuts. By 1889 the younger Thomas Fowler had moved from Millinocket Stream downriver to Medway, where he served as a state legislator and town officer. He died of a paralytic stroke in Milo in 1902. "Grandfather lumbered extensively," wrote Agnes Page Lucas. "He had a great knowledge of the river and of log driving. My mother . . . told me that when he grew too old to handle an oar or pole, he would sit on a box and pilot a boat downstream."

John Fairfield Fowler, born in Bangor in 1840, bought his brother Thomas's farm at the mouth of Millinocket Stream in 1857 or 1858, and purchased Thomas's farm on Schoodic Stream between 1862 and 1867, though Eckstorm places him and his family at the carry farm in 1867. According to Fred Fowler, his grandfather cut timber from his farm in Dolby and died at age fifty. "He caught pneumonia in the woods in 1890.

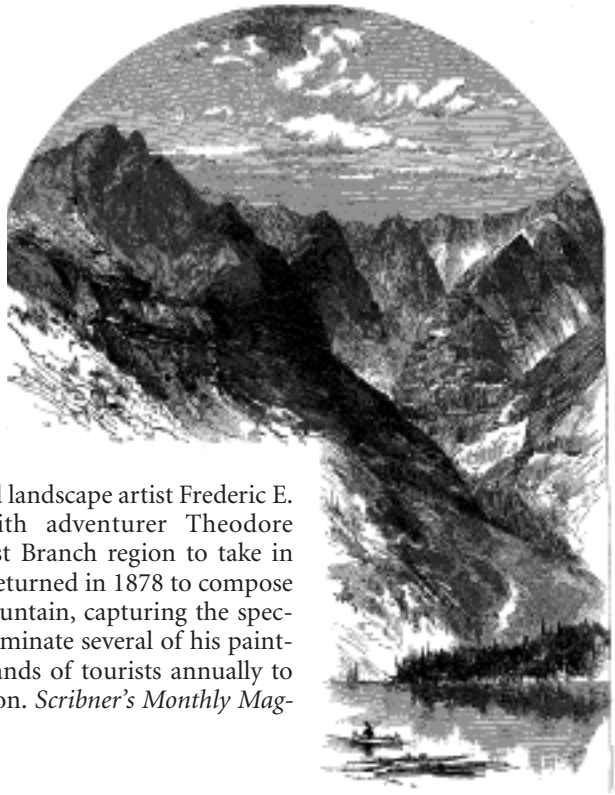
They brought him home but he didn't survive," said John's grandson Fred Fowler. Only old Fowler, his wife Betsy, and their daughter Adeline stayed at the family homestead.[27] Old Thomas Fowler Sr. lived into his eighties and died in the home he had built. "When any of his sons or grandsons came to visit, he would always call them over to where he was sitting, point to Katahdin with his cane, draw a half circle to the east, which would cover the whole townsite of Millinocket now, and would say, 'Now boys, some day there will be a city there, a railroad will come, and there will be mills built, so you save your money and buy all the land you can near here.' . . . It became a common saying among the folks when they went to visit, 'Well, I suppose I will have to listen to Grandfather's vision.'"[28]

The Fowler Legend

Wilderness defined the Fowlers, but "wilderness" meant different things to the different writers who explored the West Branch. For Thoreau, this was a place where a man "had a whole heaven and horizon to himself," and the Fowlers were "natural" men who knew its ways as if by instinct. The Fowler boys, Mrs. McCauslin had told him, were "perfect ducks for the water." They had run down to Lincoln in a bateau for a doctor one night — some thirty or forty miles — when it was "so dark that they could not see a rod before them, and the river was swollen so as to be almost a continuous rapid." Mrs. McCauslin had asked: "'why, Tom, how did you see to steer?' 'We did n't steer much, — only kept her straight.'"[29] Wilderness adventurer and writer Theodore Winthrop traveled the same region in 1855 with landscape artist Frederic Church. Returning from the wilds of Katahdin, Winthrop saw the Fowler farm as an island of civilization:

> The mother milked for us one of Maine's vanguard cows. She baked for us bread, fresh bread. . . . She gave us blueberries with cream of cream. Ah, what a change! We sat on chairs, at a table, and ate from plates. . . . There was a sugar-bowl, a milk-jug, and other paraphernalia of civilization including . . . a dome of baked beans, with a crag of pork projecting from the apex. We partook decorously, with controlled elbows, endeavoring to appear as if we were accustomed to sit at tables and manage plates."[30]

For many travelers of Winthrop's day, a wilderness trip was a return to nature; it purged city poisons and restored one's appetite for life.[31] The plentiful and simple food the Fowlers served was an important capstone



In 1855 the celebrated landscape artist Frederic E. Church traveled with adventurer Theodore Winthrop to the West Branch region to take in the scenery. Church returned in 1878 to compose this sketch of the mountain, capturing the spectacular vistas that illuminate several of his paintings and drew thousands of tourists annually to the West Branch region. *Scribner's Monthly Magazine* 1878.

Fanny Hardy Eckstorm was a student of woods lore and lumbermen's cultures in northern Maine in the early twentieth century before turning her attention to the culture and language of the region's Native American tribes. Courtesy of the Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine image no. 340.

to this experience. George H. Witherle, a member of the Appalachian Mountain Club, saw the Fowler farm as a relief from the rigors of nature:

> We got up in the morning at 5:30. The prospect was dismal enough at 7:30 when we embarked on the North Twin. It was snowing fast, the wind was northeast and raw and apparently increasing and a cold mist hung over the Lake. So that we did not dare to steer a direct course from point to point, but prolonged our distance by following the curves of the shore. We were much relieved when we sighted the outlet and entered the crooked mile of dead water beyond. . . . Then came the two-mile walk over the carry road through the wet grass, slosh and mud, still sprinkled by the falling snow and pelted by snow balls from the trees. The sight of the old Fowler House looking over a great space of gloomy woods . . . was thoroughly welcome and at one o'clock by the warm fire in the apartment which does service as kitchen, dining room, and parlor we were spreading out our wet garments to dry and shortly sat down to our first indoor meal, after nearly four weeks of tent life.[32]

The Fowlers' kitchen was as welcome to lumbermen as it was for tourists coming in from the West Branch. It starred in Fannie Hardy Eckstorm's "A Rescue," a story included in her collection of West Branch log drive narratives published in 1904. The rescue took place in 1867 and involved the two youngest Fowler sons, Frank and John, part of the first generation to live at the Carry Farm. The Fowlers, in Eckstorm's eyes, belonged to a race now lost to civilization, at one with the river and the land. In her story, seven river drivers attempted to break a log jam at the head of Grand Falls. Four were on the jam in the middle of the river with night approaching, and the remaining men poled out in a boat to pick them up. A pole snapped, the boat flipped in the rapids, and two men were lost. The third, a man known only as a Spencer, miraculously rode the boat down Grand Falls and poled his way up Millinocket Stream to the Fowler farm. Here again the farm was a dream of relief. As Spencer made his way to the door, he fancied seeing a row of smoked alewives roasting before a fire, "golden-sided fishes, standing on their heads before the bed of coals." At the farmhouse the women spread the table with "cold buckwheat cakes, . . . with the richest and sweetest of maple syrup, made from their own trees, and spicy dried-apple sauce, as brown as mahogany, flavored with nutmeg and dried orange peel, a delicious spring dainty, or custard pie without stint of eggs, and thick, soft gingerbread, such as woodsmen love best of anything."

Outside, four men were still marooned at the head of the falls, listening to the river rising in the night. Without hesitation John Fowler set out with Spencer to make a desperate night rescue. "By that marvelous knowledge of the river which with the Fowlers was almost an instinct," the two men "picked their way in the darkness among the rocks in the rising flood on that wild river. . . . No other man but one of the Fowlers could have made that rescue; everybody will tell you that."[33] Eckstorm's Fowlers unite the wild river and the civilized farm, the domestic and the untamed, the world of men and the world of women. Both the escape from civilization and the civilizing of the escape can coexist in American culture. Eckstorm united them to send her American heroes into battle against her real enemy, the modern-day pulp and paper corporation that obliterated the Fowlers' way of life.

The Age of Steam

"It was almost September, time for the logs to have been down . . . and here was North Twin Thoroughfare with two big booms choked in it," Eckstorm wrote in "Working Nights." In 1901 "the great stranger company" had taken control of the West Branch log drive that fed both the mills at Millincoket and those downstream at Old Town and Bangor. The Great Northern Paper Company had its own railroad, its own steamboats, a telephone the length of the river, and "unlimited capital." It owned the water-powers, the forests, and in good part the state legislature as well. The company, which had funded "enormous improvements" to make the river safer for river driving, was the "supreme . . . incarnation of the Money Power, the eidolon of the Juggernaut Capital which is pictured as ready to crush all who will not bow down." The only thing the company lacked, according to Eckstorm, was leaders who were willing to "fight . . . the wilderness bare-handed."[34]

Times had changed. In 1899 Charles Powers sold the Fowler farm to the newly formed Great Northern Paper Company, and the age of steam arrived on the West Branch. In 1893 the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad completed its line across the West Branch and into the northern reaches of Maine, a half-century after railroads elsewhere knit the country into a single national economy, created the stock market, and catalyzed the catastrophic depressions of the 1870s and 1880s. In 1901 the West Branch joined a national rail transport network that supported millions of workers across the country.[35]

Americans were using more and more paper: per-capita use rose from 8.1 pounds in 1869 to 56.9 pounds in 1900, and much of this use

was in the form of newspapers. Total copies of daily papers across the United States increased from 758,459 in 1850 to 15,102,156 in 1900. To meet this huge demand, paper mills proliferated across the Northeast, but as in many industries, the boom in production brought an inevitable bust. Between 1890 and 1900, the price of newsprint fell from sixty-seven dollars per ton to thirty-five dollars, ruining many small paper mills. "As prices drifted lower marginal mills were forced to the wall or into the hands of their competitors," according to historian David C. Smith; "consolidation had to come." Secret meetings in New York, Boston, and Saratoga Springs led to the formation of a huge new corporation, International Paper Company, which claimed to control 90 percent of newsprint production in the eastern United States. But when Garret Schenck's Rumford Falls Paper Mill was swallowed up by the new trust, that enterprising paper maker assembled a company that challenged IP's monopoly by buying up everything it took to make newsprint: water, wood, power, and the state legislature.[36]

The Fowler farm stood at the juncture of these first three ingredients: the place where a $4 million mill would bring together water, wood, and power and turn them into pulp and paper. Two miles away, the West Branch carried millions of board feet of wood each year to the mills in Old Town, dropping them 112 feet over Grand Falls. Company engineers literally moved the river from its original channel and ran it through the mill, just as they ran a railroad to the trunk line of the Bangor and Aroostook to get their paper to market. Before moving ahead, Schenck had made sure he could push the Bangor and Aroostook's freight rates low enough to beat his competition. "You made a devil of a fuss over the difference between paying $3.40 per ton paper Millinocket to New York, the rate we wanted, and $3.00, the rate you got," Bangor and Aroostook President Franklin Cram wrote Schenck a few years later. Schenck had given Cram an ultimatum: no $3.00 rate, no mill.[37]

The Bangor and Aroostook ran special passenger trains from Caribou, Bangor, Houlton, and Dover so Maine people could see men building the largest paper mill in the world, built mostly by hand and horsepower. The mill opened in November 1900 and was soon shipping 600 tons of paper and pulp out of Millinocket every day. In 1901, it controlled nearly 12 percent of the United States newsprint market. The company had a problem with the river, though. The Penobscot Log Driving Company, Eckstorm's heroes, had been running logs down the West Branch since 1846. The PLD needed water to flush this timber through to Bangor, and Great Northern needed the same water to run its mill. When low

The Great Northern Paper Company and its town — "Magic Millinocket" — arose beside the West Branch in 1899-1901. The mill, at the time the world's largest, stood on the site of the original Carry Farm, a testament to the prescience of the area's original settler, Thomas Fowler. Photo courtesy Millinocket Historical Society.

water kept the PLD's drive from reaching Bangor in 1901, a titanic battle erupted. A newspaper account described it as "an attempt by a foreign corporation to get complete control of the Penobscot River, using the water for its own purposes and at the same time destroying all competition in the log market." A PLD lawyer vowed that his clients were "not going to have the Standard Oil Company own the Penobscot River." Indeed, four-fifths of Great Northern's stock was held by New York capitalists, and its lead investor, Colonel Oliver Hazard Payne, had made his fortune as treasurer of Standard Oil Company. Bangor's independent lumber operators and landowners, monarchs of the Penobscot log drive for fifty-four years, weighed in against the corporate giant and lost.[38]

The year 1901 brought cataclysmic changes on the West Branch: a shift from cooperation to corporation; from dispersed local ownership to concentrated national capital; and from water power and muscle to coal and steam. Across the country, Populists were rebelling against the trusts and railroads that were ruining farmers and piling up unprecedented wealth, and Eckstorm took up that struggle in Maine. To the Great Northern Company's incompetence she contrasted the Fowlers' quiet competence; to its ignorance of place, their intimate knowledge; to all its modern resources, their muscle and skill. Her quarrel still echoes in the great Maine culture war: local working people vs. rich city outsiders. Over the next two decades Great Northern bought a million acres of Maine timberland and tamed the West Branch with an enormous hydropower system that included the fourth largest artificial lake in private hands in the United States. It brought in huge paper machines and built a second mill in East Millinocket, tripling its output between 1901 and

Eugenia and Charles Powers, shown here in the early 1890s, purchased the Fowler farm at The Carry in 1884. Fowler descendents themselves, they were the last occupants of the site near Grand Falls. Powers sold the site to the Great Northern Paper Company in 1899. Photo courtesy of the Norcross Heritage Trust.

Great Northern Paper Company brought an end to the classic West Branch river drive. The age of steam mechanized much of the log-driving effort with giant boom bags and steam-powered tow boats — the latter converted to diesel by the 1950s when this photo was taken. Courtesy of the Ambajejus Boom House Association.

In the late 1890s and early twentieth century Fred and Albert, the third generation of Fowlers, reinvented their business, operating a hotel near Norcross station and using steamships to move passengers and timber across North Twin Lake. They created the Norcross Transportation Company and continued the Fowler tradition of using local knowledge to serve as a conduit to regional enterprise. Photo courtesy of the Norcross Heritage Trust.

1917 in order to retain its 12 percent share in the expanding national market. And through it all, the stream of capital flowing northward to Millinocket was at least as important as the stream of water flowing south out of the woods and through the turbines that powered the company's Fourdrinier machines. Garret Schenck was building a twentieth-century corporation like a nineteenth-century business owner in an eighteenth-century landscape.[39]

The third generation of Fowlers created a small niche in this coal-fueled, water- and capital-powered empire. In 1893 John Fowler's son Fred had hauled boilers up the Medway tote road to Norcross where they were installed in the first steamboat on Twin Lakes, the PLD's *F.W. Ayer*. In 1899 he bought a small hotel and a steamboat business on North Twin Lake and talked his brother Albert into joining him. Incorporating as the Norcross Transportation Company in 1902, they bought a general store, a moccasin factory, and 170 to 180 acres of shorefront to protect their boating business. These two Fowlers were reinventing their grandfather's carry business in a new energy era. The railroad funneled freight and passengers to a single choke-point at Norcross Station, where

By the 1920s further advances in transportation technology and shifts in the local economy challenged the virtual Fowler monopoly on movement through the region, and their business fell into decline. The steamship *Rainbow* is shown here hauled out and abandoned decades later in 1947. Photo courtesy of Norcross Heritage Trust.

the Fowlers took them in steamboats to sawmills and sporting camps on the lakes. They also helped Great Northern's steamers haul log booms when the company's woods boss, Fred Gilbert, could steer business their way. The Fowlers built two steamboats, *Rainbow* and *Gypsy*, and at the station they built a hotel, wharf, and coal yard. Spring fishing parties took the overnight train to Norcross, had breakfast at the hotel, and boarded the Fowlers' steamboats for the good fishing holes upriver.[40] But by the mid-1920s the Fowler's new business was declining — a victim of yet another new energy source.

The Era of Oil

In the early 1920s Great Northern improved the tote road from Moosehead Lake to Chesuncook and Ripogenus lakes to carry dam-building materials and other supplies, and on March 24, 1922, Ralph Bartlett drove a new Buick up the road to Chesuncook Dam and across the ice to Chesuncook Village, making it the first auto to arrive at this once-remote lake. Soon more roads led to sporting camps on Sourdnahunk Stream and the upper lakes, and auto traffic cost the Fowlers their monopoly over travel to the upper West Branch country. The Fowlers "had a good thing going for a while because they had a monopoly," said Albert Fowler's son Fred. But with cars, "it was easier [for tourists] to drive up as close as they could get to the camps than to stay at Norcross."[41]

The internal combustion engine, which powered the tourist and industrial expansion of the "Roaring Twenties," used an energy source far more concentrated than coal, and it was not hard to see why Great Northern replaced its coal-fired *A.B. Smith* with the diesel-powered *West Branch No. 2* to tow log booms across Chesuncook Lake:

	A.B. Smith (1926)	*W.B. No. 2* (1927)
Started towing	May 19	May 21
Finished towing	September 4	July 27
Time towing	3 months, 15 days	2 months, 6 days
Crew	10 men	7 men
Fuel used per 24 hours	10 tons coal	301 gallons crude
Fuel cost per day	$250	$50
Number of booms towed	62	51

On these work-boats, 1.1 tons of oil did more work than 10 tons of coal, and since fuel had to be carried into the woods, switching to oil saved money. Oil was more efficient for work in the woods as well. Diesel- and gasoline-powered tractors could go up grades three or four times as steep as coal-powered engines.[42]

While oil was slowly changing Great Northern's woods operation, the company was going through far-reaching financial changes of its own. Colonel Payne died in 1917, and the manager who took over his estate refused Garret Schenck's request for another loan. Schenck paid off Great Northern's debt to Payne's heirs and abruptly ended the aggressive expansion program that had maintained Great Northern's share of a growing national newsprint market. "The vision that had produced the Millinocket development and the rapid expansion of the earlier years seems to have turned inward," company historian John McLeod wrote. The company failed to take advantage of "wide-open opportunities. . . while others were doing so."[43] Great Northern's workers, unlike the first Fowlers, were also settling into a civilized existence. Their living still came from the forest, and they still hunted and trapped in the woods. However, they depended on Great Northern for everything. The Fowlers' farm had become a company town, and the forest, a company property. Millinocket's citizens worked twelve-hour shifts in the mill while the company fed the woods to them in four-foot lengths. The wild river that had been so much a part of the Fowler's existence had been turned into power flowing through the company's turbines, and with it went the awe, terror, danger, and skill that Eckstorm memorialized. The

Fowler virtues, although still valued, gave way in daily life to dependence on the powerful corporation.

Old Fowler's great-grandson went to work for the corporation. Fred Fowler was born in 1924 and grew up at the Norcross Hotel while the steamboat business was dwindling. The Fowlers' new gas-powered *Minniehaha* carried sports to the camps at Debsconeag and Jo-Mary lakes, but her last trip was in 1934. Fred served in World War II after high school, went to college on the GI bill, and after two years returned to Norcross to work for Great Northern on the boom boats and in the woods as a helper on a bulldozer. After marrying, he worked in the mill for thirty-five years and retired in 1985, just before the mill began liquidating and laying off workers. Fowler lived in Millinocket but never considered himself a townsman. Before retiring he joined the Maine Appalachian Trail Club and maintained the section of the trail from the West Branch crossing at Abol to the Baxter State Park boundary. He bought a small lakefront parcel in Norcross and built his own camp there, cutting cedar logs, towing them along the shore to his land, hauling them up the rocky hill, peeling the logs in the spring to keep them white, and trimming them on one side with a chain saw. He lives in Millinocket and spends many days in his peaceful camp, which looks out over the lake where his family used to carry passengers and freight.

His Millinocket neighbors had a more troubling prospect to look out upon. Great Northern's new owners broke up the company and sold most of the forest and the hydropower dams. Forced to run on oil, the Millinocket mill finally closed in 2002. What happened in Millinocket took place on smaller scale across the northern forest. The giant corporations that anchored their workers' lives were broken up and stripped of their assets, including their timberland. Great Northern's original long-term capital accumulation strategy gave way to short-term profit expectations dictated by far-flung investors.[44]

Millinocket confronted another of those cataclysmic moments that the Fowlers knew so well. Each time, a new energy source and a new economic regime radically changed the way men used the West Branch and the woods. Today's changes actually offer more opportunities for local control than any in the last century. The river and woods will be extremely valuable resources in a clean energy economy, and the land ownership is not under the control of a single corporation. New forest owners are trying to extract value from their lands in unconventional ways, and if they are successful, new woods-based industries could bring prosperity back to Millinocket. Two psychological factors stand in the

George Fowler, Sr. (on the ladder) and Albert Fowler lower the signs from the railway station building after the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad closed it in 1953 — evidence of yet another phase in the evolution of transportation technologies and regional economies in northern Maine. The Fowler family has demonstrated a consistent pattern of handling such changes deftly. Photos courtesy of the Norcross Heritage Trust.

way of these new opportunities. One is Great Northern's departure, which ripped apart this company town's way of thinking. The other is the influential image of the Maine backwoodsman. Independent, even anti-social, and tough enough to topple tall trees and run wild rivers, he seems ill-equipped to pilot his way through a radically changed economy. Dig into the image, though, and the Fowlers emerge. Hardy and skilled in the wilderness, they also cannily assessed the shifting economic landscape. Each generation found a new place in the world at the chokepoints of an emerging forest economy. Their example remains for the people who live where their farm once stood.

NOTES

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2. Albert Fowler in *Bangor Daily News*, January 1950, Fowler family archive.

3. Joseph Chadwick's 1764 map shows a carry from Quakiss to (unlabeled) Millinocket Stream.

4. Alfred Geer Hempstead, *The Penobscot Boom and the Development of the West Branch of the Penobscot River for Log Driving, 1825-1931* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1975 [c. 1931]), p. 35; Moses Greenleaf, *A Survey of the State of Maine in Reference to Its Geographical Features, Statistics and Political Economy,* (Portland: Shirley and Hyde, 1829; reprint, Augusta: Maine State Library, 1970), p. 104.

5. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, pp. 28, 37; author's interview with Fred Fowler, August 19, 2008.

6. John S. Springer, *Forest Life and Forest Trees: Comprising Winter Camp-Life among the Loggers, and Wild-Wood Adventure. With Descriptions of Lumbering Operations on the Various Rivers of Maine and New Brunswick* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1851), p. 44; Albert Fowler interview; F.S. Davenport in Hempstead, *Penobscot Boom*, p. 37.

7. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, pp. 28, 33, 66; Springer, *Forest Life and Forest Trees*, p. 55; Bill Caldwell, *Rivers of Fortune* (Portland: Guy Gannett Publishing Company: 1983), p. 223.

8. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, p. 42-43.

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10. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, p. 3; Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and other Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 1.

11. Thoreau, *Maine Woods,* pp. 35-39.

12. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, p. 34, 36.

13. Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 4-5.

14. Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 4-7.

15. Thoreau, *Maine Woods,* p. 30.

16. Thureau, *Maine Woods*, p. 41.

17. Thoreau, *Maine Woods,* pp. 43-44, 54, 59, 67.

18. Hempstead., *Penobscot Boom*, pp. 43, 45.

19. Thoreau, *Maine Woods,* p. 5.

20. Greenleaf, *Survey of Maine*, pp. 88, 108.

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22. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977 [c. 1964]), especially pp. 68, 191.

23. David C. Smith, *A History of Lumbering in Maine, 1860-1960* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1972), p. 81; McLeod, "Great Northern Paper Company," chapter 21, p. 53-54; Springer, *Forest Life and Forest Trees*, p. 61; *The Northern,* August 1922, p. 3.

24. *Farrar's Map of Northern Maine, Moosehead Lake and Vicinity, Sebec Lake, and the Headwaters of the Kennebec, Penobscot, and St. John Rivers* (Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts: Charles A.J. Farrar, 1877); Lucius L.Hubbard, *Map of Moosehead Lake and Northern Maine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1879); Samuel L. Boardman quoted in Richard G. Wood, *A History of Lumbering in Maine 1820-1861* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1971 [c. 1935]), p. 92.

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28. Albert Fowler interview.

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37. Albert Fowler interview; Letter from Franklin W. Cram to Garrett Schenck, May 3, 1904, quoted in McLeod, "Great Northern Paper Company," chapter 8, p. 11.

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39. *Portland Press Herald*, January 18, 1929, in McLeod, "Great Northern Paper Company," chapter 10, pp. 2, 46, 57, 63; chapter 15, p. 20; chapter 21, p. 209-10; Smith, *History of Lumbering in Maine*, p. 391; Chandler, *Visible Hand*, pp. 3, 88.

40. McLeod, "Great Northern Paper Company," chapter 5, pp. 15, 33; author's interviews with Fred Fowler, August 19 and October 2, 2008.

41. McLeod, "Great Northern Paper Company," chapter 21, p. 80; Albert Fowler interview, October 2, 2008.

42. Hempstead, *Penobscot Boom*, p. 138. Hempstead's figures comparing oil to coal overstate oil's superior efficiency; weight for weight, oil is only about twice as efficient an energy source as coal.

43. McLeod, "Great Northern Paper Company," chapter 12, p. 10.

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